

# Human Smoke

## A Review

[Chip Smith](#)

*Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization*, by Nicholson Baker. Simon & Schuster Inc., New York, 2008. 576 pp. bibliography, indexed.

Nested near the end of Nicholson Baker's first book, *The Mezzanine*, is an oddly memorable scene. Set apart from the novel's famously annotated escalator ascent, the scene finds Howie – the first-person narrator – seated on a preciously described neo-Victorian bench in the plaza adjoining his office building. Whiling away the remaining minutes of his lunch hour, Howie turns to a marked page from a Penguin Classic edition of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. And is stung by an aphorism:

*Observe, in short, how transient and trivial is all mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of spice and ashes.*

The appearance of this “brutal stoicism,” treated however incidentally, is suggestive. Cast in stark relief against the novel's delicately imbricated tapestry of miniaturist cerebration, it rattles a different chord. Howie's demurral is curiously emphatic:

*Wrong, wrong, wrong! I thought. Destructive and unhelpful and misguided and completely untrue!*

Like *The Mezzanine*, Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke* is trained to a precise timeline. But where the minutely recounted lunch hour in Baker's youthfully spirited novel evoked a sense of ascendant vitality, the kaleidoscopic study of “The Beginnings of World War II and the End of Civilization” charts a long and arduous descent. It is a story that collapses rather than unfolds, in darkening newsreel edits that recede to a flicker. In such a world, the moral ember of Howie's leisure-enabled clash with a dead Roman emperor is inflamed with strange urgency.

As critics are quick to point out, *Human Smoke* is not a work of methodical history. It entertains no explicit counterfactual speculation, and it is not, except in the broadest conception, a revisionist text. Nor, strictly speaking, is it polemical – though it does advance a qualified argument – and a coronach, perhaps – for pacifism. It may be best understood as a kind of literary-historical pastiche, or gestalt. The author has described *Human Smoke* as “a swarm of images and memories,” and so it is.

Drawn in refined strokes from newspaper and magazine stories, from speeches and diaries and memos, from contemporaneous sources once widely available, a fragmented chronology of events is drip-fed. Baker's trademark flourishes of style are largely absent. The prose is spare and focused, and there is a palpable emphasis on the human experience of war. Removed military decisions are set in counterpoint to the words of those who experienced events from a more abject vantage. In January of 1941 Harry Hopkins and Winston Churchill discuss the tactical merits of the food blockade and Churchill expresses his “hope that we would not go too far in feeding any of the dominated countries.” A few pages and days later, we find an ailing German Jewish diarist, Victor Klemperer, cowering in Dresden where he records his “impossible wish” – to “drive around the United States in his own car, speaking English, reading newspapers and magazines, and going to movies.” The contrast is manipulative. It is also fair.

*Human Smoke* opens in August, 1892, when Alfred Nobel proffered to a pacifist correspondent his hope that, “perhaps my factories will put an end to war even sooner than your congresses” – a succinct and germinal expression of the modern theory of deterrence that slyly parallels the emergence of modern attritional warfare, with its unprecedented toll on civilian life. The curtain closes on December 31, 1941, when a terrible momentum had enveloped the world’s great nations and the worst of it yet loomed. The argument that emerges, in contravention of deliberative narrative form, resides in the space of foregone possibilities, and in the words of moral actors, some of them warriors on the world stage; some of them marginalized pacifists, who tried in vain to avert catastrophe.

To say that reviewers have been uncharitable toward Baker’s opus is a bit like saying that Churchill liked his martinis with a splash of gin. Emmett Tyrell of the *American Spectator* called *Human Smoke* the product of a “brute mind” and christened it “worst book of the year.” “If Baker really believes that we should have never fought the Second World War,” wrote a *USA Today* columnist, “then *Human Smoke* is terribly, even monstrously wrong.” A reviewer for London’s *Daily Mail* described it as “misleading propaganda that Dr Goebbels himself might have been proud of.” “[A] self-important, hand-wringing, moral mess of a book,” sniffed the *New York Times*. You get the idea.

Aside from such fits of spleen, Baker’s detractors do highlight a few areas of legitimate criticism and debate. First, there are those who take issue with the book’s open-ended literary strategy, which has been characterized as a kind of artful dodge, allowing Baker to imply without being implicated. There have been the inevitable charges of contextual and narrative omission (the Hitler-Stalin pact is mentioned only tangentially, and Versailles is left to the background). There has been some possibly constructive tooth-gnashing over Baker’s less than conventional interpretive spin on key events, concerning, for example, British foreknowledge of the raids on Coventry; or more broadly concerning Roosevelt’s imputed provocation of Japanese aggression through military aid to China, naval fleet expansion into the Pacific, and the fuel embargo.

Historian John Lukacs may have been the first to spot a real doozy, however – and right in the title. The reference to “Human Smoke,” attributed to Franz Halder (“one of Hitler’s restive but compliant generals”), is claimed in Baker’s epilogue to refer to the “flakes of smoke” that blew into Halder’s cell when he was imprisoned at Auschwitz. But as Lukacs notes, Halder was imprisoned at Flossenbürg and Dachau, but never Auschwitz. This revelation will of course come as no surprise to more intrepid revisionists, who are well familiar with such conflation. It’s best to move on, really.

Because in any event, these are peccadilloes, contretemps. A more angrily focused strain of criticism attaches to Baker’s myth-shattering portrait of Winston Churchill. A great man comes off badly, and there must be reasons.

“Bombing was, to Churchill, a form of pedagogy,” Baker writes in a rare editorial clip, “—a way of enlightening city dwellers as to the hellishness of remote battlefields by killing them.” That Churchill held to such a doctrine is not controversial. The substance of it is articulated freely and frequently in statements public and private, sometimes in cadences of dark humor (confronted with the matter of killing German children, there is his repeated quip that, “Duty must come before pleasure”); sometimes in the spirit of a high romance (“Death stands at attention,” he wrote in a coda to his history of the Great War). And sometimes, as witnessed by the Prime Minister’s call for “an infinity of sacrifice,” with brutal stoicism. Writing about the naval blockade instituted under his admiralty during the First World War, Churchill would brag to have “treated the whole of Germany as if it were a beleaguered fortress,”

to have “avowedly sought to starve the whole population – men, women, and children – into submission.”

Faced with the shards of what may fairly be construed as an indictment, Baker’s critics have been of two minds, often expressed in the same paragraph. On the one hand, Baker’s imputed “humorless monomania against Churchill” is attributed to an obtuse failure to apprehend the true meaning of a grandiloquent leader’s penchant for mordacious turns of phrase. Under this line, Baker simply fails to get the joke. So many jokes. Baker’s dark spell is manipulative, say the apologists, to the point of mendacity. And when words turn to deeds, guardians of myth are left to rejoin with the convinced insistence that the grim litany of particulars amounts to so much old business, anyway – all justified through the vicissitudes of a difficult tactical skein, all necessitated by dire circumstance, all well explained by trusted historians to whom readers are referred by way of corrective.

Such assurances ring false. Emphatically, it is not commonly known that the RAF’s aerial bombardment of German cities predated the Battle of Britain. Nor is it commonly known that Churchill locked up thousands of German-Jewish refugees for the duration of the war. Nor is it commonly known that Canadian Mounties, under Royal command, sent citizens of Italian descent to detention centers after Mussolini’s declaration of War, as the British did as well. Nor is it commonly known that Allied food blockades, faithfully endorsed and shepherded by the British Bulldog, starved civilians, or that relief efforts were thwarted by Allied executive powers at virtually every turn. Such matters are known to historians, to whom they are a source of abiding discomfiture. The traditional telling is thus draped in emollient inflections, in grasping contextual qualifications, and in lies. The heroic narrative must be preserved.

From the famous if misremembered “Blood, Sweat and Tears” speech, Baker cites Churchill’s solemn promise to wage war on a “monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime,” and there is irony. Decisions trace to actors. And Winston Churchill was an actor on the world stage whose decisions brought death and misery to many. In the “dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime” he was a perpetrator. His sweeping oratory extolled valorous ideals to justify the burning of children, in places like India, like Palestine, like Germany. He is exalted as a bulwark against illiberal forces, a bully for democracy whose recalcitrance was a grand virtue. But Baker’s account permits us to see what is more likely – that a man of formidable presence and impetuous temperament often acted out of a tragic fealty to festering nostalgia. Churchill wrote of “a white glow, overpowering, sublime, which ran from our island from end to end.” These are the words of a delusional man locked in a tragic romance with the remnants of Empire. These are the words of a man who followed the logic where it would – to where death stands at attention.

Churchill cared not a wit for the plight of European Jews, or for innocent Germans (“the Huns”) in whose suffering he languished, as words reveal. When context permitted, he spoke fondly of fascist mettle, and he spoke harshly, in the conspiracist’s argot, of Jewish machinations. He was a glutton, who celebrated starvation under the banner of strategy. To such a man, mortal life cannot have been but “transient and trivial.”

Early on in *Human Smoke*, Baker frames his portraiture with a revealing anecdote credited to a writer well known to revisionists:

*Baron Ponsonby, author of Falsehood in Wartime, remembered something that Winston Churchill had said to him years before. "I like things to happen," he had said, "and if they don't happen I like to make them happen." It was March 11, 1929.*

And so he did.

Defenders of myth will labor in faith to restore the stained likeness of this grand and shallow creature, and they will succeed for a time. But *Human Smoke* chips at the edifice; it lays out plain and damning evidence in contrapuntal volumes not easily ignored or patched with historians' gleam and gloss. Dissident voices have, of course, made essentially the same argument for decades. We have the words of Neilson and Charmley, and of David Irving, before his fall. Yet the case has always been fashioned in a manner that befits the historians, and to stir the usual suspicions. Baker's audience is different, and so is his form. Critics are wise to difference. Thus they are shrill.

### **Immoral Equivalencies**

Of course, the rattling of hagiographers is to be expected. A more telling feature of the animadversions against *Human Smoke* may be noted in the incessantly hurled charge that Baker is guilty of something fashionably understood to be "moral equivalence." This tack, taken most explicitly by David Pryce-Jones in his *Commentary* review, "Immoral Equivalence," is implicit in the haughtily dismissive tone of nearly every negative appraisal yet filed.

Whatever its intellectual pedigree, the business of "moral equivalence" has assumed a cloying ring of late; like "American exceptionalism," it has come to be a muddled watchword, a shibboleth thrown up to stifle rather than advance debate. Observe how the embedded presumption of moral superiority – or moral asymmetry – is never tested, is never justified through the rigors of disinterested ethical analysis. Out of cathexis to a cherished narrative, critics are loath to engage in such heavy lifting. Executive military conduct by great men of favor is simply withheld from moral criticism. The taboo is strong. The triumphal snort is easier. Harry Truman may have been guilty of monstrosities that far outweigh the crimes for which Charles Manson was imprisoned, but decorum reigns. If this is your view, hold your tongue. Lest you be cast into outer darkness. There is no analogy between conscription and slavery, said a judge.

And yet, the shoe doesn't even fit. When Baker provides inconvenient accounts of the genteel anti-Semitism indulged by beloved textbook heroes, he is clearly not suggesting some crude equivalence to Alfred Rosenberg's stunted philosophy. This is true even when Churchill's rhetoric lapses close enough to the virulence fairly understood and condemned in Nazi vernacular, as indeed it does. The reality, too easily lost in lore, is shaded by facts, shaded by degree. When Franklin Roosevelt effectively blocked legislation that would have permitted thousands of mostly German-Jewish children entrance to the United States, Baker tempts us to recall the sentiments of the selfsame young lawyer who years before bemoaned the ostensible overrepresentation of Jews at Harvard University, and who sought to do something about it. The same Winston Churchill who in 1920 condemned a "sinister confederacy" of Jewish-Bolshevism would later order the forced confinement of "enemy aliens and suspect persons," resulting in the incarceration of as many as 11,000 Jews for the duration of the war. And we are likewise invited to wonder.

This is at least as fair as Baker's treatment of the Nazis. Adolf Hitler is seen as an emotionally volatile militarist, which he was. He is depicted as a man consumed with mad passions and bristling hatreds; a man prone to stentorian tantrums, who was probably mentally ill, and who was yet amenable to reason. In Baker's chronology, it is clear that Hitler sought to avoid conflict with Britain. It is clear that his rise was purchased in the ashes of Versailles, and that his power was at times tenuous. He was dangerous and distrusted, and human. Hitler too was an actor on the world stage whose decisions brought death and misery to many. But of course, this is never disputed.

Goebbels appears as a seething romantic, an odd mix of melancholic disposition and cold reserve. Early in *Human Smoke*, Baker quotes diary entries that reveal how he relished his friendship with Hitler in a manner that recalls the pining of fatherless child. Later, in 1941, Goebbels would write: "the world war is here, and the annihilation of the Jews must be a necessary consequence." Is this disputed? Certainly not by Nicholson Baker.

Moral ambiguity is not moral equivalence. A continuum is not a slope. Evil is a word. That Baker's mature and searching study should be met with such hostility is not merely unfortunate; it betrays an acute apprehension that in turn masks a deeper need for assurance. Scored in the human condition is a marrow-deep craving for the solace of a Manichean duality that never existed, and never will. To slake this need, a story is repeated, rhetorical snares are set. A refuge is erected. Those who are troubled are given cover.

### **The End of Civilization**

Which brings us to the screamingly obvious subtext behind the "moral equivalence" that is so confidently projected onto Baker's patchwork. To wit, that it is a byword, meant to evoke the infinite moral weight of a singular event – an event conceived with theological precision to counter every imagined asymmetry. "It takes a fair amount of audacity to challenge the conventional wisdom about World War II," wrote Richard Cohen in a *Washington Post* column critical of Baker's thesis. "This is especially the case since the war has become conflated with the Holocaust, the evil of which cannot possibly be argued."

Here it should be emphasized that at no point in *Human Smoke* nor in supplementary interviews and commentaries does Nicholson Baker evince the slightest trace of doubt or qualified skepticism concerning any part of the standard Holocaust narrative. Yes, a few critics have attempted to cast suspicion, sometimes with coy reference to Baker's allegedly credulous treatment of Himmler's doomed Madagascar Plan, or with the hanging intimation that there is something "curious" behind his unexpected project. But such is the noise that comes. With a few taut references to Wannsee, intoned with requisite foreboding, Baker's good faith is affirmed.

There are two references to Zyklon B in *Human Smoke*. The first recounts the agent's intended insecticidal use at Auschwitz in early 1941. That vignette is signed in a plaintive, ominous drumbeat: "The lice died." The second comes later in the same year and is derived from Rudolf Hoess's problematic confessions. That serious and decent people could be moved to doubt the latter event would scarcely occur to Baker. That the Wannsee minutes might be subject to a less nefarious interpretation than what is allowed is a possibility withheld from consideration. Baker sincerely believes what most good people believe.

The argument that remains is simply that there were real chances to avert the enormity of what came. Baker has cited the historian Shlomo Aronson for his view that the British bombing raids against German population centers – to “cut Germany at its tap root,” as Churchill put it – served only to unify the populace behind Hitler’s regime. In a response appending an online discussion forum devoted *Human Smoke*, Baker provides some tentative clarification:

*I can't help wondering whether some sort of negotiated ceasefire late in 1939 or in mid-1940 might have reopened western escape routes for Jews (shut down by England and France as soon as war began) and even possibly allowed for the recrudescence of more moderate factions within Germany. (I keep remembering what pacifist Frederick Libby said in his congressional testimony: that the Jews stood “a better chance of winning their rights at the conference table with Great Britain and the United States as their champions than they do on the battlefield.”) Also, I can't help suspecting that the stepped-up British bombing campaign of 1940 and 1941 – “Keep the Germans out of bed, and keep the sirens blowing,” as Lord Trenchard put it – was a gift outright to Hitler's government, in that it helped a rage-prone, mentally ill, murderous fanatic hold on to power through five years of hell.*

Let us stipulate that the presumed Nazi genocide of European Jewry is, to whatever extent, rationally contestable; that the “moral equivalence” trump card may one day be taken out of play, or at least removed from the top of the deck. Even if revisionists are vindicated on every foundational particular, the reality of Jewish persecution under Hitler’s iron hand will remain resonant, both as a cultural signpost and as an historical fact. We can never know if Baker is correct about opportunities foregone. But we do know something of what came to pass, in the immediate years following Baker’s chronology, and in the long aftermath of Allied victory. We know about Dresden. We know about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We know about the camps where so many met their fate. We know about the totalitarian states that would emerge in the wake what was – is – justified. There would be a Gulag and a Five Year Plan. And there would be millions of innocent lives ground to spice and ashes. Mao and Uncle Joe were surely enabled b

y democratic powers, as Saddam Hussein’s regime would be in time. Interlacing narratives present questions without answers. Questions that Baker is right to ask.

Some readers of *Human Smoke* have expressed confusion over Baker’s sub-titular reference to “the End of Civilization.” Such confusion is telling; it lays bare a runted incuriosity. To the man experiencing the painful throes of advanced starvation, who is driven to cannibalism, there can be no such confusion. To the mother crouched in a Dresden basement who lives to tend her child’s mortal wounds, the end of civilization has already come.

### **Pacifist Traces**

And so it circles back to Alfred Nobel’s earnest missive, and to the ironically provocative matter of pacifism. Listen as Baker recounts a telling exchange between two men of letters:

*Christopher Isherwood had tea in Palos Verdes, California, with his friend Wystan Auden, the poet. Auden had by now abandoned his antiwar position. He told Isherwood that he disliked Sanskrit words – the sort that Gandhi used. “The truth is,” Auden said, “I want to kill people.” It was August 3, 1940.*

It has been observed that much of Baker’s literary career is animated by a desire to rescue from oblivion the evanescent traces of moments, and so it is no surprise that his treatment of sweeping events should

be chorused with the forgotten voices of those strange idealists (glibly dismissed by David Pryce-Jones as “loners and egoists”), who sought to shunt the tides of war, or simply to alleviate suffering. Threaded throughout *Human Smoke* are the often eloquent words of avowed pacifists, cornered humanitarians, and stolid champions of non-intervention.

There are the stories of conscientious objectors, imprisoned by the Allies, shot in Germany. There are the words Catherine FitzGibbon of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, who testified in opposition of U.S. military conscription, drawing analogy to “a totalitarian pattern” that mimicked Hitlerism. There are the words of Dorothy Day, editor of *The Catholic Worker*, who called war “The Folly of the Cross.” There is the story of Jeneatte Rankin, a Montana Congresswoman who said “you cannot have war and liberty.” When Congress declared war on Japan in the feverish atmosphere that prevailed in the wake of what FDR would call “an unprovoked and dastardly attack,” Rankin stood alone in voting “no.” When she attempted to speak on the House floor, she was shouted down.

Then there are the stories of differently motivated opponents of the war, like Sir Oswald Mosley and other British fascists, who were incarcerated without hearing. And of men like Charles Lindbergh, who professed sympathy and admiration for the Nazi state. Baker discusses the efforts of the America First contingent as well. Contrasted with “genuine pacifists,” these were, as he contends, the “isolationists” – many of paranoid and selectively militaristic temperament – who “wanted the United States to lay off Germany because Germany was the bulwark that held back Stalin.”

Prominence, however, is given to the efforts of men like Clarence Pickett, the executive secretary of the American Friends Service Committee, who along with another Quaker, Rufus Jones, and the celebrated anti-war preacher Harry Fosdick, fought to lift food blockades and lobbied unsuccessfully for legislation that would have allowed child refugees passage to U.S. shores. “We can do no less than give every aid possible to help those who come to us to make a new and fruitful start,” wrote Pickett in 1938.

That the stories of these men and women are little known is no surprise. They were cast as pariahs, more so as the war bore on and the full weight of what Harry Elmer Barnes described as a “blackout” descended. *Human Smoke* rescues them, at least for a moment, from the footnotes.

As the Churchill cultists fulminate and the Holocaust cultists register their special pique, the echo remains comfortably partisan. It is Baker’s rehearing of the pacifist’s appeal that rouses a more visceral – and more ecumenical – shade of contempt. Confronted with Gandhi’s unavailing entreaties “to fight Nazism without arms,” to bow to slaughter rather than profess false allegiance, Christopher Hitchens declared “that everything in me declines to be addressed in that tone of voice.” He later decries the pacifist position, sympathetically investigated though never unconditionally embraced by Baker, as “fatuus.” Other critics have dismissed Baker’s perceived capitulation to white-flag waving sentimentality in telling terms – as “incredulous” as “naïve” as “simplistic,” or just inarguably, meretriciously wrong.

In an interview with James Mustich for the *Barnes and Noble Review*, Baker is given to reflect on the situation. “I think that some of the pacifist looked goofy,” he says:

*It was sort of humiliating to be a pacifist in England in 1939 or 1940. The newspaper Peace News – the printer refused to print it. Pacifism was almost taboo. And the people who continued to say that*

*airplanes shouldn't be taking off from England and flying deep into German cities and dropping firebombs were really looked at as pariahs.*

It's one of those things; it makes sense until you give it a moment's thought. Yet it is possible, is it not, to at once harbor doubt about Gandhian absolutism and yet kick against the fundament of what is tacitly assumed? The Rorschach aversion to pacifism must arise from somewhere, after all. Indeed, Auden's frank admission seems to be rooted at the quick. Like the human predilection for religion or patriarchy, it fairly reeks of biology, an instinct toward conflict. Leo Rosten famously observed that "men like war." That an there is an inverse corollary might be inevitable. *Human Smoke* stirs many demons. This one is restive.

In rejoinder to Baker's easily caricatured hope, the warfaring mind may seek comfort in one of Churchill's magisterial proclamations. "It would be better far," said Winny, "that the civilization of Western Europe with all its achievements should come to a tragic end than that the two great democracies should linger on, stripped of all that made life worth living."

Concerning that which makes "life worth living," an avowed killer's grandly phrased presumption reveals rank arrogance. To borrow Hitch's line, everything in me declines to be addressed in that tone of voice.

It's a safe bet that the oppressed existentialists at Vichy found time for a drink, or even a laugh. There was a theater at Auschwitz, and a swimming pool. Surely there was music as well, until there wasn't. Life is made of fragments. Time is everything. In the space of time, shoelaces can break, and treaties can be signed. In time, possibilities can be tested against an invitation to apocalypse. To understand this is to see what Churchill – and what Marcus Aurelius – could never see.

*Wrong, wrong, wrong*, Nicholson Baker thought. This time aloud, in the dim hope that someone might listen.

<b>Author(s):</b>	<a href="#">Chip Smith</a>
<b>Title:</b>	Human Smoke
<b>Sources:</b>	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , vol. 1, no. 1 (summer 2009)
<b>Dates:</b>	published: 2009-08-01, first posted: 2012-09-26 00:00:00

<https://inconvenienthistory.com/1/1/1901>